

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 92 (2013) 757 – 763

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Lumen International Conference Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty (LUMEN 2013)

Happiness – Between Aspiration and Fulfilment

Teodora Prelipcean^{a*}^a“Petre Andrei” University of Iași, 13, Grigore Ghica Vodă str., Romania

Abstract

The idea of happiness holds an utmost position among the great themes of meditation in philosophy, and it is a constant concern for any human being. From this viewpoint, the concept has been a red thread in the history of mankind and, as such, it has provided philosophers, theological scholars, writers and poets, as well as common people with enough reasons to analyze the complex issues it engenders – what is happiness, what are its sources, or to what extent can it be achieved? Significant scholars in the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary world, the Christian, Hebrew and Arab traditions, polytheistic and non-theistic approaches, they all have debated, from various perspectives, the possibility or impossibility of happiness on earth, what a *happy life* or *true happiness* is, or the path one has to follow in order to achieve it.

This study aims to analyze critically the manner in which the wish to be happy and the hope of achieving this state are approached by the scholar Petre Andrei in his work *Despre fericire [On happiness]*. Thus, the psychological origins of happiness and the possibility of being truly happy, the possible causes and the contents of happiness, its social and ethical grounds, vulnerability to outside conditions and the role of practical wisdom in the achievement of the state of happiness, happiness as an impulse to moral action – all these are major landmarks in Andrei's approach, and the author's answers are both competent and profound. In this context, we believe that the interaction and mutual conditioning between all these elements, highlighted by the Romanian philosopher, and the way he mixed the theoretical perspective with our representations bring an added-value to the understanding and analysis of this phenomenon as a whole, contributing, to the same extent, to the creation of an authentic picture of the way in which the fundamental mechanisms of happiness can be recognized and clarified.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences, Asociatia Lumen.

Keywords: happiness; ideal; value; intersubjectivity; moral; social environment; wisdom;

* Corresponding author. Phone.: +40-232-210-474; fax: +40-232-214-858.

E-mail address: lylyprelipcean@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

In his work “Principiile filosofiei” [Principles of Philosophy], René Descartes drew attention on the importance and the role played by “true philosophers” in a state, asserting that “each nation is the more civilised and cultured the better men philosophize there; and that, consequently, the greatest possible good for a State is to have true philosophers” (2000, p. 66). A great figure in Romanian culture, Petre Andrei (1891-1940) fits perfectly into the sphere of “true philosophers”, as he fully contributed both to a better understanding of the socio-political-historical context in which he lived and to the shaping and developing of new scientific disciplines in the Romanian area.

A philosopher, a sociologist, a politician, and university professor, a member of the National Peasants’ Party, a Member of Parliament (1929-1933) and Minister of National Education (1938-1940), Petre Andrei, post-mortem member of the Romanian Academy, is a reference point in the history of Romanian philosophy and culture. Seen as one of the founding fathers of the system of sociological sciences in Romania, the scholar Petre Andrei played a special part in the development of sciences. His works ponder on various subject matters, from sociology, politics, philosophy, and logic to axiology, ethics, and pedagogy. *Mecanicism și teleologism în sociologia contemporană* [Mechanicism and Teleologism in Contemporary Sociology] (1915), *Sociologia revoluției* [The Sociology of Revolution] (1921), *Problema fericirii. Fundamentul său etico-sociologic* [The Issue of Happiness. Its ethical-sociological grounds] (1921), *Probleme de sociologie* [Issues in sociology] (1927), *Fascismul* [Fascism] (1927), *Sociologie generală* [General Sociology] (1936), *Filosofia valorii* [The Philosophy of Value] (1945), *Etică generală* [General Ethics] (1999), *Istoria filosofiei* [History of Philosophy] (1983, 1997), *Sociologie specială* [Special Sociology] (1983) are only some of the scholar’s scientific works; some of them were published in his lifetime, others posthumously. Worth mentioning are also his *Discursurile Parlamentare* [Speeches in Parliament] (1922-1933), which highlight the variety of his concerns and of the activities that he developed as a politician and MP; his interventions demonstrate good knowledge of the realities specific to the interwar period, and they advocate the changing of laws in agreement with the requirements of that time, administrative decentralization, the reforming of education, and the democratization of culture.

In what follows we are going to focus on the issue of happiness and the specific way in which it was approached by the Romanian philosopher. Why did we choose this topic? The arguments are multiple, the first one being provide by the author himself, when he asserts that “the course of individual life and the evolution of social life are a constant chase for happiness” (Andrei, 2011, p. 480). The other arguments are relative to the work and the issue at hand themselves. As a matter of fact, what Petre Andrei wrote in 1920 continues to be true even today, as his thoughts and ideas are an unending source of wisdom for those who, keeping their critical sense always awake and their eyes constantly open, are in a constant pursuit of happiness. Another argument in favour of this choice is the fact that the Romanian philosopher did not follow someone else’s path, that is, the mere historical account of what the idea of happiness had meant for various philosophers and schools of thought in the past. Petre Andrei relates to the great philosophers and the great traditions but he does it from a critical perspective, as he constantly questions them, and, what seems to be even more important, he approaches the issue of happiness not only from a theoretical standpoint but also from a practical one, as he always corroborates the two aspects, and tries to warn us about the provisional and fragile nature of happiness here on earth. Last, but not the least, we pondered on the theme of happiness because it has seduced both philosophers, writers, poets, scientists and common people, as no one has ever doubted the fact that happiness is desirable and is one of the ultimate values to which we aspire.

2. Reference points in the approach to the issue of happiness

What is happiness and how it can be defined, what is true happiness and to what extent it is possible here, on earth, are only some of the questions that haunted all those who have pondered on this theme. However, if we

take a closer look at some of the recent works on this topic, we see that each philosopher focused on a particular aspect in the approach to happiness. For instance, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, in his work *În căutarea fericirii* [*The Conquest of Happiness*], provides a series of “recipes” meant to guide the readers’ steps in their continuous effort to eliminate the causes of unhappiness and to become happier (2011, p. 7). Unlike Russell, Comte-Sponville, Delumeau, and Farge bring us *Cea mai frumoasă istorie a fericirii* [*The Most Beautiful History of Happiness*], a book which reviews the meanings given to the concept by well-known thinkers and the most important philosophical trends. Beyond the fact that the title seems to be rather mercantile – it is, in fact, a history of the idea of happiness, of the manner in which it was understood at various times and in various socio-cultural contexts, a history which cannot be “the most beautiful” or “less beautiful” – the authors provide us not only with an expert incursion into the issue but also with rich reflections on the meaning of happiness today. Gilles Lipovetsky’s *Fericirea paradoxală* [*The Paradoxical Happiness*] belongs to an entirely different trend. The author asks himself whether the “hyperconsumption society”, this “empire in which the sun of merchandise and individualism never sets” (2007, p. 34), centred on the consumer and the special place he holds in the universe, smoothes our path to happiness, such as, apparently, it is supposed to do. It seems not, as the *hyperconsumption society* is, in fact, “a civilisation of paradoxical happiness” (p. 10). In other words, material wealth and comfort are not the only conditions necessary and sufficient for happiness.

What makes Petre Andrei’s work *Despre fericire* [*On Happiness*] stand out amongst the numerous works devoted to this topic, is the complex manner in which the issue was analyzed and approached. People’s constant aspiration to happiness, its subjective nature, its link with the social setting, and, last but not least, what seems to be extremely important, the relationship between happiness and morality from a twofold perspective: happiness as a “result of morality” and, at the same time, an “impetus to moral action” (2011, p. 479) are just as many reference points which individualize this author in his approach to this issue. Given this entire world that needs to be analysed, the philosopher starts by turning his attention to the *psychological sources of happiness* and to the two directions that stemmed from the answers given to them, *subjectivism* and *objectivism*. Whereas the representatives of the former conception – be it *intellectualist*, *affective*, or *voluntarist* – claim that our soul is the only source of happiness, the supporters of the latter conception – in its *theological* or *social* form – see happiness in a relationship of dependence with factors outside the human being. We will not insist on the description of these two trends for reasons of space, and because Petre Andrei does it very well. Yet, in this context, it is important to mention that neither of them, taken separately, could capture the complexity of this phenomenon. Happiness is not what we feel in particular circumstances, and intelligence cannot be “the ultimate element which gives birth to such a complicated phenomenon” (p. 482). From here, we should not conclude that “intellectual happiness” does not exist. For instance, it is likely that the Greek scholar Archimedes was happy or extremely happy when, upon discovering the basic principle of hydrostatics, he exclaimed “Eureka”. Therefore, “intellectual happiness” does exist, but it cannot be the only form of happiness. First of all, it is not “ready at hand for every human being” (Russell, 2011, p. 127). Secondly, because happiness, as an emotional state, “cannot be induced only by the objective and cold relations established by intelligence” (Andrei, 2011, p. 482). Of course, “the cultivation of an orderly mind, which thinks about a matter adequately at the right time” (Russell, 2011, p. 65) can raise the number of reasons to be happy, yet feeling too, this “strong inner force” (Andrei, 2011, p. 483), holds a well-defined place in the achievement of happiness and represents an inexhaustible source in its pursuit. Nevertheless, happiness cannot be reduced only to feeling, to what our senses and passions offer us. Intelligence and knowledge have their place and their purpose. Otherwise put, “if intelligence without feeling is cold, and has no dynamic force, feeling without intelligence is blind” (p. 484). Also, *voluntarism*, although “it has the merit of showing that happiness is achieved through action, that we have to fight to accomplish it” (p. 485), taken per se, it is a unilateral conception. In what regards *objectivism*, according to it happiness is deeply rooted only in the surrounding environment, in the outside world. Our soul is “purely receptive” (p. 486), and the causes of happiness are always independent of people. Is it true that it is impossible to find happiness within us but if we were no more could we still talk about happiness? Are we not the ones who experience it, feel it, and express

ourselves consequently? This is why neither *theological objectivism*, which “contradicts the moral nature of happiness and moral in general” (p. 488), nor *social objectivism*, which misleads us by “neglecting personality” (p. 488), a phenomenon also noticed by Russell in his work (2011, p. 15), can offer us a clear picture of the psychological sources of happiness. In other words, we should take into account both reason, feelings, will, and the social environment. Only their marriage will allow us to get a better understanding and to explain better the psychological sources of happiness. Happiness as a theme does not exist neither in the absence of the individual nor in the absence of the outside world. It is the prerogative of “any reasonable being” (Kant, 1995, p. 55), but it does not depend only on the individual. Happiness is not within us, although every individual experiences it in his own specific way, it is outside us. In the absence of a “you”, of a “someone” or “something” happiness does not exist. Someone can be happy when they see the one they love, or when they become parents, or when they fulfil their goals, etc. As a result, the causes or sources of happiness are infinite and differ from one person to another.

Another question that the Romanian philosopher tries to answer focuses on the possibility of happiness. Otherwise put, is happiness a real state or not? Obviously, the answers proposed from Democritus up to now have been different. On the one hand, there are the supporters of the possibility and reality of happiness, *the optimists*, and on the other, those who reject this possibility, *the pessimists*. In Petre Andrei’s opinion, optimism can be *dispositional* or *reflexive*. In what regards the former, the author talks about a *dispositional optimism of the future* and one of *the past* (2011, p. 490). *Reflexive optimism*, the latter form, can be *theoretical* or *practical-social*. In their turn, these can take a *philosophical* or *theological, biological, moral, and economic* form (p. 491). In this context, worth mentioning are the characteristics of *social optimism* – activity and perfectibility, a feature also stressed by other authors (Comte-Sponville et. al., 2008, p. 158). In what regards *pessimism*, we notice that the topic is treated in analogy with optimism. Thus, we talk about *dispositional pessimism* and *reflexive pessimism*, and the latter can be *theoretical* or *practical-social*. Also, *theoretical pessimism* can be *theological, philosophical-metaphysical, and scientific* (Andrei, 2011, p. 507 and next.). Yet, both optimism and pessimism are viewpoints which exaggerate in a way or another. In this context, we should also mention that we do not have in mind the interpretation given by theologians or believers, who claim that happiness is possible and also real but not here, in the kingdom on earth, but beyond, in the kingdom in the skies. We are interested in the possibility or impossibility of happiness here on earth. This is why, in order to give a proper answer to this question we should start from a “realistic view of life” (p. 534), which requires giving up “the idea of permanence, eternalness of happiness” (Comte-Sponville et. al., 2008, p. 146). Happiness is durable here on earth but not in the sense that it can be a permanent state, but in the sense that a happy moment, once experienced, can never be taken away from us. We will remember that moment throughout our entire life, and we will be able to share it with other people.

Therefore, we should better be neither “full of hope” nor “entirely deprived of illusions” (Pleşu, 2008, p. 23). As a solution Petre Andrei proposes a “fairer conception” (2011, p. 535), namely meliorism, according to which progress does exist, or, in other words, the world in which we live can be ameliorated, being possible for it to get better and be progressively improved. From here, the thinker concludes, it results that happiness too “is achieved along with progress in mankind” (p. 536). From our viewpoint, the issue of happiness cannot always be associated with that of progress. There are no steps on the path to happiness. We can talk about progress in the case of morality, goodness, liberty, and, especially, technology, but not in the case of happiness. Could I say that had I been born two or even five centuries ago I would have been unhappier than now? Definitely not. Progress, regardless of its nature, can provide us with *other and more reasons* to be happy. At the same time, the same reasons can be as many causes of unhappiness for others. Also, it is possible for the total number of happy moments to grow. But we will not be able to claim each day that we are happier than the previous day and less happy than the next day. We experience happiness here and now. There can follow, eventually, moments in which sadness, suffering, melancholy, etc overcome us. Then, it is possible for happiness to come back to us again. This is the course of life. Happiness and unhappiness constantly entwine in the course of our existence. To

say “I was completely happy” or “I was completely unhappy” seems to be an exaggeration. Things should not be categorized in absolute terms. Here, on earth, we will always move back and forth between good and bad, justice and injustice, liberty and constraint, pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. However, we can talk about various *degrees* of happiness. If someone asked us what was the greatest happiness we have experienced it is likely that we would all know what to answer. For instance, Russell believed that the happiness of being a parent seemed to be “greater than any other” (2011, p. 175). Therefore, happiness manifests in various forms. There are several kinds of happiness, some greater or lesser than others.

Incontestably, happiness, either individual or collective, does exist. Of course, we are social beings and our happiness often depends on circumstances specific to the society in which we operate. Thus, we come to the last aspect approached by the Romanian philosopher in what regards happiness. It focuses on the social and ethical grounds of happiness. Living in society, our individual purposes are supplemented by those of our fellow men. As a result, it is obvious that “moral law is empty without the individual man” but we all be “blind without the intuition of a trans-individual order” (Pleșu, 2008, p. 30). As a result, the nature of happiness is not “individual, selfish” (Andrei, 2011, p. 540). In the absence of other people we would not have too many reasons to be happy, just as the others expose us to unhappiness, deception, failure, disappointment, and discontentment in general. There is a close relationship of interdependency between the *individual* and *others* in the achievement of happiness, even if today “something in our relationship with our others was lost” (Comte-Sponville et al., 2008, p. 142) and “personal happiness is seen as more important than the look thrown at that of others” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 291). Nevertheless, receptivity to the others’ misery and needs, the wish to help them, has not disappeared entirely. In other words, “the heart of the hyper-consuming individual has not ceased to beat; it only beats at a different pace” (p. 127).

Otherwise put, we must constantly think about the welfare and needs of our fellow men, because “the greatest happiness is conditioned by our relation with ourselves and with others” (p. 163). In this respect, “moral teachings are apt to improve the world” (Russell, 2011, p. 93), to influence for the better people’s actions and attitudes, to improve the relationships between them and their communities. Moral, “this final step of wisdom” (Descartes, 2000, p. 72), cannot be eluded in treating the issue of happiness. The Stagirite himself believed that “happiness is the highest good in the field of practical life” (Aristotle, 1998, p. 31). Is happiness a goal or an effect of moral, the Romanian thinker asks himself. His answer follows the middle path. Happiness can be both *a goal and an effect* of moral (Andrei, 2011, p. 540). If we take into account the fact that our happiness cannot materialize at the expense of others, and we are constantly concerned with our fellows’ good, then we will know how to act so that everything we do contributes not only to our own happiness but also to that of others.

After these brief considerations on the issue and complexity of happiness, could it be possible to define it? Of course, philosophical discourse does not lack such definitions. The criteria used to define happiness are also numerous. Pleasure, wisdom, virtue, conscience, perfection, success, good, love, joy, satisfaction, wealth, comfortable living, etc., have been seen at various times as being synonymous with happiness. Yet, these criteria are unilateral and it is not wise to generalize them because they “do not take into account the actual man with his needs and spiritual desires” (p. 504). They are, of course, “ingredients of happiness” (Russell, 2011, p. 46), some of its necessary components, but they are not sufficient if they are taken separately. To all these we should also add the importance of the role played by *a bit of luck* in the achievement of happiness (Comte-Sponville et al., 2008, p. 22), something that was acknowledged and mentioned by many thinkers. It is both important and difficult to discover not only which of these elements can lead us to happiness but also the exact “quantity” needed for each individual. In other words, we need to discover “the key”, “the recipe”, or “the secret” of happiness. And this seems to be almost impossible, even if advanced ideas in this respect are not absent. The British philosopher, for instance, believes that the secret of happiness is to have “interests as wide as possible”, and our reactions to “things and people that interest us to be as sympathetic as possible, and not hostile” (Russell, 2011, p. 139). His recommendations are very helpful, of course, in our pursuit of happiness, but they do not guarantee our success.

Returning to a possible definition of happiness, in Petre Andrei's opinion, it is "the durable satisfaction of will through the accomplishment and realization of goals" (2011, p. 82). In our view, happiness is a vast and complex territory, which cannot be encompassed within the limits of a definition. This is why a proper, clear definition which would lack imprecise terms or figurate expressions is impossible to formulate in the case of the concept of happiness.

3. Conclusions

What is happiness, what are its psychological sources, is it possible, and how can it be achieved here on earth – these are only some of the fundamental questions which the Romanian philosopher and many others have tried to answer. For sure, solutions are not simple and they are not available to everyone. Difficulties emerge every step of the way. And this because there is no single recipe capable of showing all "the ingredients" that it encompasses and the exact quantity needed for each of them in order to guarantee its success. In other words, there is no happiness in the abstract or absolute sense, but only individuals who are happy at various moments in their life. Happiness here on earth is not a permanent state or an attribute of things. It is an attribute of people, as they are involved in a "constant chase for happiness" (Andrei, 2011, p. 480). However, there are no people *fully*, *perfectly* or *entirely* happy here on earth. Absolute happiness here on earth exists only through "theoretical abuse" (Pleșu, 2008, p. 63). There are degrees of happiness, if you want. We can be more or less happy, more or less unhappy, but never absolutely happy or absolutely unhappy. However, a happy moment cannot actually be lost, not even with the passage of time. It will linger forever in our memory, and we will be able to share it with others. This is precisely why we can talk, in time and in various situations, about the greatest happiness we have ever experienced. Also, let us not forget the social origins of happiness, the others' contribution to its fulfilment, "the interdependency, solidarity and mutual conditioning between collective happiness and individual happiness" (Andrei, 2011, p. 537).

In what regards the possibility or impossibility of being happy, opinions are quite varied. As Petre Andrei himself notices, we constantly move back and forth between the optimistic voices which tell us "You will be happy" and the opposed, pessimistic, voices which tell us "There is no chance". It is true that eternal happiness cannot be achieved in day to day life, but "vanity and vexation of the spirit" (Ecclesiastes, 2, 17-26) is not everything. As a result, we cannot claim that it "cannot be attained at all in this world" (Kant, 1995, p. 156). It is possible for happiness to be only a moment, or, as Petru Creția said, "the light between two darks", and we could meet it only once in our life. And it cannot be reduced only to drinking, eating, and being satisfied with what we have done or accumulated in life (Ecclesiastes, 2, 24). We do not exclude the possibility that those who have nothing to put on the table would consider themselves happy when they get a copious meal. Also, it is likely that in some critical situations, such as, for instance, that of a man who wondered for days in a desert without a drop of water, we would be happy to receive a glass of water. In what regards *contentment*, *happiness* and *contentment* are not identical terms, just like there is no identity in contents and meaning between happiness and *joy*, *pleasure*, *satisfaction*, *fulfilment*, although these terms are often confounded. And "living well and enjoying success" (Aristotle, 1998, p. 31), an ideal also "constantly upheld" (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 305) in the hyperconsumption society, do not mean the same thing as happiness. They are only means through which we can achieve what we call happiness. What is their particular contribution to happiness is something that every person only knows for themselves.

Therefore, the condition of temporality, and the complexity of reality, which "is not subsisted by anything of the absolute rank" (Pleșu, 2008, p. 61), as well as the fact that "the human soul is complicated and varies from an individual to the next" (Andrei, 2011, p. 478) do not let us provide an answer valid anywhere, at any time, and for everyone in part. In all likelihood, the best answer to this question is that provided by several philosophers. According to them, *if we want to achieve happiness, then we need to set any target other than one – happiness*. In other words, "let us not talk about the road from the angle of its finishing line" but "let us talk while we are

walking on it, accompanied by the weariness, uncertainty, as well as the tenacity of walking” (p. 147). Otherwise, we could walk through life only hoping for it.

References

- Andrei, P. (2011). Despre fericire. In P. Andrei, *Opere Filosofice* (pp. 478-541). București: Editura Academiei Române.
- Aristotle. (1998). *Etica Nicomahică*. București: Editura IRI.
- Comte-Sponville, A., Delumeau, J., & Farge, A. (2008). *Cea mai frumoasă istorie a fericirii*. București: Editura ART.
- Descartes, R. (2000). *Principiile filosofiei*. București: Editura IRI.
- Kant, I. (1995). *Critica rațiunii practice*. București: Editura IRI.
- Lipovetsky, G. (2007). *Fericirea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum*. Iași: Editura Polirom.
- Pleșu, A. (2008). *Minima moralia*. București: Editura Humanitas.
- Russell, B. (2011). *În căutarea fericirii*. București: Editura Humanitas.